


Learning Language As An Aspect Of Teaching
Literature In The Elementary School

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Purpose of Thesis

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In teaching language arts, the modes of language such as reading, writing, speaking, and listening are often not taught as integrated modes. Instead, children are often part of a program that emphasizes reading and writing, but rarely addresses the importance of speaking and listening.

It is slowly being recognized that the teaching of children's literature is an excellent way to help students become better listeners, speakers, readers, and writers. Some teachers are using more trade books instead of or with the traditional basal. As a result, integrated, literature-based reading programs have been established by publishing companies but these programs vary widely as to whether they concentrate more on the content of the literature or the reading skills. They also vary as to whether or not they truly integrate the processes of language instruction.

The teaching of reading, which is a major focus in the elementary school, should not be set aside; but as children are taught to value quality literature, reading can be integrated with the other processes of language instruction. This approach would truly make children better readers, writers, speakers, and listeners and would give children a larger view of how literature works in our world as well as broadening their horizons overall.

Learning Language as an Aspect of Teaching Literature in the Elementary School

At one time in the elementary school, the teaching of the language arts only consisted of the teaching of reading and sometimes writing. Even now, speaking and listening often occur in isolation. There are a growing number of theories regarding language instruction. Many are beginning to recognize the importance of teaching literature as a vehicle of integrating the four modes of language. Publishers are under mounting pressure to refocus their programs, and yet the developing theories still vary immensely within the teaching community.

While many would agree that having literacy-rich classrooms is beneficial, there still seems to be a disagreement between those teachers who emphasize reading and reading skills and those that emphasize literature. A study by Sean A. Walmsley found that "It is as though there are two communities, one that researches reading and promulgates approaches to reading instruction, the other that examines children's literature and makes recommendations about how it should be taught" (508). In addition, the concept of literacy seems to have been divided and redivided; the end result being that few are sure what is really encompassed in the idea of literacy. Walmsley and Walp suggest that there are two primary aspects of literacy

and they are reading and writing (253). Buckley emphasizes these two areas but encourages teachers not to abandon the listening and speaking elements of language arts (43). The idea of a visual aspect of literacy is addressed by Marrietta Walden Castle. There are even resource books for teachers that highlight ways that skills instruction is incorporated into whole language such as Ten-Minute Whole Language Warm Ups: Quick Skill Building Practices by Suid and Lincoln. But such books tend to lack depth and do not integrate language arts instruction.

One reason that there is so much confusion in this matter may be because the process of language instruction is really made up of four basic language modes that are developmental and are intertwined. They should not be joined together as one subject. Currently, reading, writing, spelling, language, and handwriting are just some of the topics of language arts that have been fragmented into various parts in the classroom curriculum. Students need integrated instruction in each of the language arts. The language modes should be perceived as tools with which to communicate and enhance learning throughout all of the subjects taught in school.

In light of this, children's literature becomes important to the elementary school classroom. Children's literature is a subject in which instruction in all of the language arts modes can be integrated and they can be

abundantly practiced and clearly applied. Not only does the study of literature promote the refinement of the language modes, it also incorporates aspects of books such as style, illustrations, and format (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 240-63). These elements of children's literature are some of the many facets of books that help to make children's literature so much more meaningful to children. A literature-based reading program still has a central focus on that mode of reading, therefore true learning about literature is not likely to occur. From a study of how literature has been incorporated into the elementary school classroom, Sean Walmsley states that the "elementary teachers we interviewed did not have either an instructional philosophy for the teaching of literature or a well-developed practical scheme for integrating it within the elementary curriculum" (510). The researchers found out very little about "how teachers thought reading and literature were connected" (510) let alone how literature connects with the other language modes. Purves reflects that "literature is often seen as simply a subset of reading and writing (with an occasional nod to speaking and listening)" and that it "fits into the elementary program as something pleasant to read and perhaps as something interesting to write about" (94). Not only has the area of literature been largely ignored, but the language modes of listening and speaking have often been neglected in favor of teaching that relies heavily on reading and writing. There is also concern that current

trends do not even truly prepare students for a secondary curriculum that is more literature-centered (Walmsley 510)

According to Nola Kortner Alex "the refining of the basic skills that make up the language arts--listening, speaking, reading, and writing--is accomplished more easily in an environment that offers the varied language experiences that come with literature" (3). Therefore, when thinking about children's literature as a field of study rather than an element of reading instruction, it is important to first consider listening as it relates to the other language modes as well as to how it is influenced by the teaching of literature.

Listening

While there is some disagreement as to whether listening develops as the first level in a hierarchy of the language modes (Walmsley and Walp 253; Buckley 43) listening is viewed as an important link to the other modes such as reading (Dwyer 4; Hyslop and Tone 2-3). Some even believe that since we spend so much time listening in our daily lives that listening skills should be taught as an entirely separate part of the curriculum (Hyslop and Tone 2-3). This is unrealistic since many elementary teachers already have limited time for language arts instruction (Walmsley and Walp 252); however, listening skills are an integral part of a good literature program and should not be overlooked.

A flaw in many reading-based language arts programs is that listening is seldom considered. Buckley suggests that a

reason to include listening is that refining the listening mode is a direct link to fostering growth in the area of cognitive thinking (41-45). Huck, Hepler, and Hickman agree that listening should be a part of all levels of elementary instruction because "reading comprehension is improved as students listen to and discuss events, characters, and motivation" (721). They also suggest that through listening children are more able to predict, increase vocabulary, and explore different genres. Hyslop and Tone add that not only does listening entail cognitive thinking that is similar in nature to that of the other language modes, but that the empathy involved in listening is what makes it unique (2-3).

One good way to incorporate listening into a literature program is through reading stories aloud to children. Huck, Hepler, and Hickman recommend that preschool and kindergarten students listen to stories three or four times a day and that primary students be read to twice a day. This can be accomplished through the teacher or parent volunteer reading aloud, but also through a listening center. Recording stories on tape allows students to hear stories over again which helps children to internalize language besides the fact that it is enjoyable for young children to hear stories repeated (720).

Similar activities that encourage listening include readers' theater. Readers' theater is a good way for teachers to begin with drama as an activity in speaking. In readers' theater the students are given a script and after

reading through their parts, the students read the text orally. Many texts can be adapted by the teacher for students to try. For a student this kind of dramatization "broadens living and learning experiences by playing the roles of people in the past, in other places, and in different situations" (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 790). It is also valuable in promoting integration of language. Students must read their parts in order to understand them, and they demonstrate their comprehension through their speaking. An understanding of the way authors write also helps the students demonstrate their knowledge of the literature through drama. Other forms of drama, such as creative drama and improvisation, further encourage the students to put themselves in the place of characters as there are no prewritten lines. Caution should be used in allowing children to write out lines because "usually their writing skill is not equal to the task of natural dialogue" (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 789). Students must listen to each other in order to demonstrate understanding of characterization by reacting appropriately. Students in the audience use their listening skills to derive meaning from the drama (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 788-93).

Storytelling is an excellent method of promoting listening that is versatile in the sense that it can be performed by the students, by the teacher, or by a professional. Storytelling is based on the method that was formerly used to remember history. Therefore many folktales

are easily adapted to storytelling as they were most likely a part of the oral tradition (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 724-27; Dwyer 1-5). A skilled storyteller may also adapt personal stories to tell (Peck 138-41) which encourages the empathetic nature of listening that is noted by Hyslop and Tone (2-3).

Benefits of storytelling in the classroom according to Peck include acquiring a sense of story, sharpening memory skills, discriminating between style and genres, and that the listener has a role in providing feedback to the teller (140). Perhaps the most important aspect of listening in a literature program is that it allows poor readers to experience the rich language that is involved in literature. Students who frustrate easily with the skills encompassed in reading are given a chance through listening to a storyteller to use comprehension that is similar to reading (Dwyer 49; Hyslop and Tone 2-3). When elementary students are given a chance to listen to stories, it helps to motivate the students' interest in literature; it helps the students to learn different aspects of literature; and it helps students to become better listeners. Peck also recognizes that "active participation in storytelling enhances fluency and expression in oral language" (140).

Speaking

The mode of speaking is one that is closely related to listening and also to literature. Speaking is a main way that we communicate throughout life. In order to speak

well, a student must incorporate such things as pitch, volume, inflection, and fluency to make the voice expressive (Peck 140). Speaking is an important way of conveying meaning which makes it valuable to the literature program. Speaking is also linked to the other language modes, for instance, Manzo and Manzo note that "there is a potentially important relationship between speech defects and severe reading disabilities" (105). In general, the act of speaking is important as a means of expression for as Buckley puts it "certainly speaking well should be a hallmark of students who have had the privilege of twelve years of education" (45).

There is a wide range of activities that can be used in relationship to speaking. Students may simply retell a story in order to show comprehension of plot, theme, characters or setting, or they may discuss the book with a teacher or with other students (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 729-32). A benefit of discussions of literature is that they can be easily adapted and applied to the various elements of literature. Through discussions, students can better interpret the theme of a story or pick up the many facets of characters. Comparing settings and plots of books may help students understand different styles of writing which will ultimately help them become better readers and writers. Hearing other people express themselves orally about literature can help students gain more of a multi-faceted view of literature than just their own

impressions. This ultimately gives them a larger picture of the world.

In addition, speaking activities may also be of a more dramatic nature. Altieri believes that dramatic activities help students to develop empathy, which is a trait that is promoted through the act of listening as well (74-75). Even simply reading can be dramatic as Buckley states that reading aloud can convey meaning as students try "to breathe oral life into the dead print so that the text is alive with meaning" (45). Altieri emphasizes the fact that dramatic activities allow the student to communicate in a creative way through such activities as writing plays, puppetry, or videotaping (74-75). Readers' theater is another way that students can speak effectively in order to present text with the aid of scripts. Alex includes suggestions of "dramatic interpretation, sharing creative art projects, book talks, tape recordings, or anything else that the class can think of" (3). Storytelling is another excellent way to develop oral language as it requires students to develop poise, recognize listeners' feelings, and use oral expression in meaningful context. Another benefit of storytelling is that emphasis is on the telling of the story, not the memorization of a script (Peck 140).

The speaking mode will improve when the speaker has opportunity to not only participate in various speaking activities but also to rehearse each activity before presentation. This is like being read a favorite story over

again as it helps internalize language. Speaking activities require students to show meaning to others whether they are presenting the words in a book to someone else, making inferences, or being able to present their own point of view. A better speaker will be more believable.

Benefits of good speaking are also reaped by the listener who gains comprehension as the speaker speaks. Speaking activities allow students to communicate what they read to a greater audience of teachers, parents, and peers; however, it is not the audience that is most important, it is the speaking that demonstrates true acquisition of language.

Reading

Although reading has been divided from the other language modes and subdivided into skills that have been largely overemphasized, the mode is still considered to be of vast importance. Clearly, it is important for people to read in order to receive information on a daily basis. In the classroom, the importance of reading is also clearly evident. Walmsley and Walp suggest that "reading and writing together should constitute most of the time set aside for language arts" (254). In fact, Manzo and Manzo in their book about literacy disorders include listening, speaking, and writing as "reading-related literacy functions" (104) increasing the importance of reading even more as the other language modes are seen as a part of reading.

Walmsley highlights the fact that reading has been treated as something to be done only after skills have been mastered, and that in classrooms that used basals, poor readers rarely got a chance to choose children's literature to be read on an individual basis (509). Literature-based reading programs have made an attempt to incorporate literature into the reading program. These programs tend to vary widely as to whether the primary focus is placed on the literature or the reading (Lehman, Freeman, and Allen 3-4; Tunnell and Jacobs 474, 477; Walmsley and Walp 253; Zarrillo 23). Lehman, Freeman, and Allen note that in their study "none of the 10 teachers had a primarily literary focus in their literature-based teaching" (17). Walmsley found that teachers incorporated literature into their language arts programs "'for fun' or 'to teach reading skills'" (510).

There are some similarities between a good literature-based reading program and teaching reading as a part of a children's literature program of instruction. One such similarity is the fact that in both programs a variety of literature is used including student-written works (Zarrillo 27). Various activities that utilize the other language modes are also evident in both a literature program and a literature-based reading program. For example, Peck suggests that storytelling influences reading in the sense that it helps with critical thinking as well as understanding the parts of a story (138-140). Alex includes "the use of natural text, reading aloud, and sustained silent reading." in suggesting activities used in literature-based reading program (2). These activities are

also ones that are important in influencing reading as a part of a children's literature program (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 708-760).

A main difference between the programs is that literature instruction enhances the reading of literature in a way that can never happen with reading instruction alone, even if it is literature-based. An example is that in literature instruction, illustrations are evaluated as part of the text. Castle recognizes that although illustrations were formerly regarded as merely a means of motivation, breakthroughs in visual media such as television has made visual signals increasingly important. In books that have both text and illustrations, it is sometimes wondered "whether the visual cues give context for interpreting the verbal message, or the verbal message gives context for interpreting the visual message" (5). At any rate, reading and using what Castle calls "visual literacy" are similar in the way that schema is used in relationship to deriving meaning from both the illustrations and the text. Alex suggests the importance of the visual aspects of children's literature when she states that wordless picture books give students the opportunity to derive individual meanings from the ideas of the author (2) and yet this is from an article entitled "Using Literature To Teach Reading". Joe Wayman in his resource book for teachers, The Other Side Of Reading, suggests that the ability to visualize is a "forgotten skill" (3) in the area of reading. Wayman suggests that

students have become so focused on left-brain activities such as decoding and phonics skills that they are unable to use their right-brain to use imagery to make pictures in their minds (3-5). Picture books can encourage growth in the area of visualization so that children can continue to use imagery throughout reading for the rest of their lives.

The choices an artist must make as an illustrator of a picture book are essential to the way the reader perceives the story. Each illustration is a work of art and provides study in the elements of art such as line, shape, space, and color. The perspective of each illustration is also detrimental to how the reader is affected by the book. Different stories are presented through different media such as oil paint, colored pencil, or collage. The pages that come before and after the actual text of the story such as the title page often display illustrations that help the reader to make predictions about the book. This encourages comprehension of the plot of the story.

Along with the study of the illustrations, teachers may also encourage the study of the story as a work of art. If students develop understanding of the art forms, they can better understand how to create their own works of art through writing their own books.

According to Huck, Hepler, and Hickman, children do not learn to value literature automatically. They must be shown how to compare and contrast the elements of quality

literature. One element that is essential to the study of literature is the plot, or "plan of action" (21). This is a chief factor in whether or not the book is likeable by children.

Setting is another factor inherent to the study of literature that is not always emphasized in a skills oriented program. The setting is where and when a story takes place and is essential to the believability of the plot.

Theme is the larger meaning in a book and is often the reason that the author wrote the story. Theme helps a student link the ideas of a story to the real world. Comparing different themes through listening, speaking, reading, and writing helps students develop the ability to discover symbolic meaning, an area often difficult for students to comprehend.

The element of characterization is also important for children to study. Children that speak as a certain character are able to show facets of that character as they are portrayed in a book. Huck, Hepler, and Hickman state that "the credibility of characters depends on the author's ability to show their true natures, their strengths, and their weaknesses" (24). The more a student understands characterization, the more they will understand about how to develop characters and the more they will understand about themselves (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 21-32).

Making links between such things as style,

illustrations, and format is a part of teaching about a literary work; but it is not necessarily always considered as a part of reading.

Children should be exposed to meaningful reading activities and a variety of reading activities no matter which program their teacher endorses. Reading is something that should be practiced often and not seen as something that only good readers get to do (Walmsley 511).

Writing

Though the teaching of the mode of writing is more prevalent than those of listening and speaking, writing has often been seen as secondary to reading. Just as reading has become a separate subject in the school day, so has writing. Writing has also been divided into distinct parts such as phonics, spelling, and handwriting (Walmsley and Walp 253). This division is not necessary in a program that focuses on literature, for as Huck, Hepler, and Hickman note "writing and reading go on all day in a classroom where language arts and reading are intertwined and literature is at the heart of the curriculum (732). They also discuss the importance of having a variety of writing materials at a writing center.

Writing can be done in a variety of ways, and writing activities are directly linked to those of reading, listening, and speaking. For instance, students can write their own scripts for dramatic projects, write in a journal in response to something they read, or write down a story

like one the storyteller told (Peck 138-141; Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 732-35).

Over the years what is expected in writing has changed from mostly editing to an emphasis on composition (Walmsley and Walp 25). In order to compose their own literature, students must have an understanding of the parts of a story. Some believe that story grammar should be taught through story mapping, and some believe that internalization of story structure is developmental (Gray 157-64). At any rate, identifying the parts of the story such as characters, setting, conflict, resolution, and theme is already a part of a literature program. Mary Jane Gray finds in regards to story grammar that "while knowledge of story structure is of benefit to the reader in understanding and remembering the story, teaching this structure may not be the ONLY way, to arrive at understanding." (162).

Another aspect in composing literature is the idea that the end result of the writing mode is to share it with a greater audience. Willinsky stresses the importance of different means of publishing the work of the students and also treating the students like real authors as much as possible (619-23). Huck, Hepler, and Hickman suggest that one of the benefits of publishing at the end of the writing mode is that it "gives real reasons for revisions" (735). Students should write about subjects that interest them and make several revisions before arriving at the completed work. Merrilees and Haack suggest writing a book a week

using the writing process in order to promote "creativity and excitement" (5) in their students.

In a literature program, the elements of literature are of a central focus and this knowledge helps children to understand the writing mode. This is not to say that children must always write stories for it is just as important to use writing to reflect on something that has been read or heard.

In a study of teachers of literature-based programs by Lehman, Freeman, and Allen and another study by Zarrillo, writing is not discussed at all as a mode of literature. Instead, it is barely mentioned in sections about reading projects or means of evaluating reading. It is time for writing to be seen as a way to join content across the other language modes rather than as a subject that includes such things as handwriting skills (Walmsley and Walp 253). The study of literature encourages this.

Concerns

Lehman, Freeman, and Allen found that teachers in their study sometimes "seem to be using children's literature as just another program for teaching reading" (21). This will continue to happen as long as researchers are assessing literature-based reading programs. In addition, teachers need to provide students with a clearer link as to how listening and reading are related as listening is often not practiced or modeled for students on a regular basis. Students also need to be able to speak about what they read,

write, and hear. This should not just be encouraged in an isolated lesson but practiced constantly with students speaking in small groups as well as in front of the class. Students need to demonstrate that they can be believable and defend their own opinions as they demonstrate their knowledge of plot, theme, characters, and setting.

Even more confusion seems to be mounting as publishing companies attempt to rise to the demand of teaching literature through the production of integrated language programs. Some of the newly developed programs are attempting to integrate reading, language, and spelling with some trade books into one basal program. Although these programs attempt to address current needs in the elementary schools, students seem to spend much less time reading as one story is still separated into countless skills. It is yet to be seen if these programs properly include speaking and listening or if they truly center around the teaching of literature. Sorting out the theories of instruction is difficult enough without all of the discrepancies there are in terminology; these need to be sorted out so that teachers can have a clearer choice of the best means of preparing their students. Educators should be provided with a more solid means of teaching these important language modes to children.

Ultimately, literature should be seen as the means of teaching the language modes of reading, writing, speaking, and listening. In math class, addition, subtraction,

multiplication, and division are seen as interrelated parts of math and not as separate entities; but the separation is exactly what we have done to literature and language arts.

Implementing a literature program can not be easy due to the amount of time that must be spent on selecting materials and keeping activities varied and creative. Selection of books that have won prestigious awards such as the Caldecott and Newbery awards can be helpful (Huck, Hepler, and Hickman 831-41). However, implementing a successful program will remain limited as long as teachers are unclear about the role of reading, writing, thinking, and listening. Although it is not known if these elements occur in a hierarchical fashion, it is known that the modes are interrelated and central to the understanding of literature. It is also known that refining these modes in relation to literature helps develop them in other subjects as well. Purves states that "school literature has often been fitted, rather uncomfortably, into 'the language arts'" (94) when actually the reverse should be true. The modes of language should be incorporated into literature.

In the end it must be realized that our instruction must transcend the memorization of rote skills in hopes of "helping students gain access to, enlarge, and communicate knowledge--of literature, of history, of geography, of science, of culture, even of themselves" (Walmsley and Walp 253). The language arts modes are such an integral part of

creating this broader knowledge base that they can not be separated from each other, or from literature. We can only hope that in future years the role of literature will become an integral part of elementary school classrooms and a more integral part of helping children learn about language and about life.

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